Domestic toil pays off for Haris in lethal spell against Sri Lanka

Dawn Report

RAWALPINDI: Hit to all parts by India in the Asia Cup final at the end of September, Haris Rauf turned to domestic cricket to rediscover his mojo.

On his return to international cricket, the grind of first-class cricket paved the way for a fiery spell of fast bowling that clinched victory for Pakistan with the 32-year-old ripping through the Sri Lankan top-order, and finishing with figures of 4-61, as the hosts scraped to a six-run win in the first One-day International at the Pindi Cricket Stadium on Tuesday night.

"It wasn't easy to win tonight," Haris said at the post-match press conference. "It wasn't easy to bowl in the dew but you keep trying as a bowler to pick wickets and in the end we won, which was important."

The performance was important for Haris as well. Slammed for being too easy to put away in the highly-charged Asia Cup final against arch-rivals India, the right-armer got back to work with Islamabad in the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy.

"You keep giving your best effort and try to make an impact," he said. "In our field, there is no forgiveness. Expectations are always high but sometimes you win, some times you lose. We are not machines. As a player, you have to keep believing in yourself as there is always the next morning after the night."

The first Quaid-e-Azam Trophy outing at the start of October against Lahore Whites didn't give Haris much of a chance to flex his arm. In a match that petered out to a draw, he bowled just eight overs, picking 1-21.

The second match, at the end of last month, also didn't go very much to plan with the speedster returing figures of 2-82 in 17 years in the first innings before getting 1-34 in 10 overs of the second innings as Islamabad were handed a crushing 311-run defeat.

The key, though, as he noted on Tuesday, was about getting the overs in the tank.

"As a player, as a bowler, you start preparing for the next assignment," he told reporters, adding that was also looking to return to the Test side. "One-dayers demand longer spells so I played four-dayers, which helped. You aim to bowl around 40 overs during the match and fine-tune your body."

Having been dropped for the T20 series against South Africa, Haris was set to return for the three-match ODI series against South Africa in Faisalabad last week, only to be suspended for the first two games after being found guilty of violating ICC's Code of Conduct during the Asia Cup match against India.

He played the third ODI, but bowled just three overs as spinners took charge and led Pakistan to a series win over the Proteas.

DIFFERENT STORY

On Tuesday, however, it was a different story.

Pakistan had rode on a brilliant unbeaten century by Salman Ali Agha and a maiden ODI half-century by Hussain Talat to post 299-5 and after Sri Lankan openers had given their side a solid start in the chase, Haris made the difference.

He broke the 85-run opening partnership between Kamil Mishara and Pathum Nissanka, getting the former caught at mid-off and then had Kusal Mendis chop him onto his stumps on the very next delivery.

Haris then found the seam movement that led to Nissanka's undoing, the opener getting caught behind, and Sri Lanka having been reduced to 90-3. The pacer, though, wasn't done for the night as he returned to end a fourth-wicket stand of 57 by sending back Sadeera Samarawickrama, after a brilliant catch in the slip by Babar Azam. Sri Lanka were down and out at 210-7 and although Wanindu Hasaranga made a 52-ball 59, Pakistan got over the line.

"It was a team effort that took us to victory," said Haris. "You win as a team and you bowl in partnerships. Sometimes you don't get wickets from one end but you get it from the other end."

TURNING POINT

The second match of the series is on Thursday and Sri Lanka will look to hit back, having lost their way after they had Pakistan on the ropes early on.

Hasaranga, who picked up 3-54, had reduced Pakistan to 95-4 halfway through their innings only for Salman (105 not out) and Hussain (62) to wrest back momentum and power the hosts to what proved to be a winning score.

"That was the turning point," Hasaranga said at the post match press conference. "Credit should go to Salman and Hussain as they batted really well. In the first 20-25 overs, we did really well but then our plans and their execution went wrong."

It was a sentiment that his captain Charith Asalanka had shared earlier at the post-match ceremony.

"The way Salman and Hussain batted, it took the game away," said Asalanka. "We gave away too many runs, it should have been under 270."

Pakistan skipper Shaheen Shah Afridi admitted the partnership between Salman and Hussain was key but added a word for Haris: "A target of 300 was good and then Haris gave us crucial wickets."

TURIN: Ben Shelton of the US hits a return against Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime during their ATP Finals match at Palasport Olimpico on Wednesday.—AFP

Auger-Aliassime off the mark at ATP Finals

TURIN: Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime came from a set down to earn his first victory at this year's ATP Finals with a 4-6, 7-6(7), 7-5 win over American Ben Shelton on Wednesday.

Shelton's service-and-volley game powered him to the opening set but Auger-Aliassime forced a decider with a tie-break victory in the second and then broke the American's serve to convert a third match point in the final set.

Both players had lost their opening round-robin matches, Shelton beaten by Alexander Zverev and Auger-Aliassime by defending champion Jannik Sinner.

The Canadian has given himself a real chance of making the semi-finals with a hard-fought win. Auger-Aliassime needed medical treatment during his loss to Sinner, but the Canadian brushed off those worries, despite Shelton storming to a 4-1 lead in the opening set.

The American lost his cool when failing to serve out for the set, launching his racket in frustration when Auger-Aliassime made it 5-4, but Shelton broke the Canadian again.

"He was playing much better than me at the start," Auger-Aliassime said. "It's not often that I get broken twice in the first set indoors."

Shelton forced the only break point of the second set, but in the tiebreak Auger-Aliassime broke immediately to take a 3-0 lead.

The American hurt his knee when attempting a quick change of direction, limping through the rest of the tie-break, but managed to save three set points before a double fault ended his valiant effort. Shelton did not need any medical attention.

The Canadian held break points at 2-1 up in the final set but had to wait until the final game where Shelton was guilty of gifting match points, and Auger-Aliassime did not refuse.

"It was a weird start, but as the match went on I was finding ways to put returns in the court," the Canadian added. "Once we engaged in the rallies, I felt like I could win more."

Late on Tuesday, Italian Lorenzo Musetti was the last man to arrive for the ATP Finals and came close to being the first man to exit, but, backed by the Turin crowd, he made a remarkable comeback from the brink to defeat Alex de Minaur 7-5, 3-6, 7-5.

Musetti missed out on ATP Finals qualification when he lost to Novak Djokovic in Athens on Saturday but was drafted in to make his debut when the Serbian withdrew.

He had little time to recover before Monday's 6-3 6-4 loss to last year's finalist Taylor Fritz, and was back in action again on Tuesday knowing defeat would bring elimination.

Musetti took the first set without conceding a break point and had De Minaur on the rails in the second set opener only for the Australian to survive and go on to force a decider.

The Italian's loss to Djokovic took almost three hours, and was the third three-setter Musetti had played last week in Athens. A third set against De Minaur seemed one too many when the Australian took a 2-0 lead.

The Italian crowd roared on encouragement at every point won by Musetti, and even some that were lost, like when De Minaur hung on to win a 31-shot rally, holding serve to go 5-3 up.

Musetti pulled out a cheeky through-the-legs shot, but De Minaur, falling backwards, somehow won the point and both players collapsed to the floor.

It looked like Musetti had lost his chance, but he went on to win the next four games and claim the match, beating his chest after winning dramatic points and rallying the crowd who needed little encouragement.—Agencies

Hazlewood gets all-clear for Ashes opener after hamstring scare

SYDNEY: Australia paceman Josh Hazlewood went to hospital for scans on a possible hamstring injury during a domestic match at the Sydney Cricket Ground on Wednesday but was later cleared of a strain and will travel to Perth for next week's first Ashes Test.

Both Hazlewood and Sean Abbott, who was named in the Test squad as a backup fast bowler, went to get scans after bowling for New South Wales on the third day of a Sheffield Shield match against Victoria.

"Hazlewood left the field late in Victoria's innings at the SCG today, reporting tightness in his right hamstring. He underwent precautionary scans which have cleared him of muscle strain," Cricket Australia said in a statement.

"[He] will join the Australian squad as planned in Perth [and] will train as planned in the lead-up to the first Test."

With skipper Pat Cummins already out of the series opener because of a back injury, Australia are expected to send out Hazlewood with Mitchell Starc and Scott Boland as their pace attack. The uncapped Brendan Doggett is the other pace option in the squad.

Cummins told reporters in Sydney he was bowling at 90 percent after a back injury and building towards being fit for the second day-night Test in Brisbane on Dec 4.

"It's still pretty aggressive, going from nothing to trying to get ready for a Test match in four weeks. But we're going to give it a good shot," he said.

Uncapped Abbott was confirmed as suffering a "moderate-grade hamstring" injury, Cricket Australia said.

"He will not be available for selection for the first test match in Perth and his return-to-play plan will be developed over the coming weeks," the statement added.

Hazlewood, who took 1-22 in his nine overs, did not come out to bat and was clearly limping when he came to shake hands with the other players after Victoria won the match.

Steve Smith, who will lead Australia in the absence of Cummins at Perth, acknowledged it was a nervous afternoon.

"Fortunately it was just some tightness [for Hazlewood] and he's good," Smith said.

"I was like, 'What do we do with Starc? Do we just put him on ice completely? It's hard when you're playing a game and you want to do well for your state, but then you have an eye on next week.

"I was like, 'Geez, I just don't want Starcy to get injured [as well].' I told Boland, 'You can bowl one spell and be done as well'," Smith said about Starc and Boland, who play for New South Wales and Victoria, respectively.The first Test against England starts at Perth Stadium on Nov 21.—Reuters

'England will be ready for Ashes opener despite lean preparations'

PERTH: Captain Ben Stokes brushed off concerns about England's Ashes preparations on Wednesday, saying there was no way the squad could prepare in the same way touring teams of the past had, given the demands of the modern game after a chorus of criticism led by legends Ian Botham and Geoffrey Boycott.

England's full squad only assembled in Perth last weekend, some coming from a white-ball series in New Zealand where they crashed 3-0, while others arrived in dribs and drabs. They only have one red-ball warm-up game before the opening Test in Perth on Nov 21 — a three-day clash against England 'A'.

"I don't really know what we're supposed to do, to be honest," Stokes told reporters at Lilac Hill Park, where the internal match will begin on Thursday.

"The schedule is pretty jam packed to be able to sort of prepare how teams probably would have 10, 15, 20, 30 years ago, I think there's a lot of factors that have changed over the years in cricket.

"We've been preparing for this for a very long time. Come the 21st of this month, we know that we would've done everything that is possible that we could've done to be in the right place to go out there and hopefully start the tour how we want."

In contrast, almost all of Australia's Ashes squad have been playing domestic Sheffield Shield matches around the country. Boycott wrote in a recent column for British newspaper *The Telegraph* that England's preparations were "madness".

"If they win in Australia it will be in spite of their lack of match practice, not because of it. Match practice would give them a better chance," he said.

Stokes is adamant England are ready for what will be a gruelling showdown as they bid to win a first series in Australia since 2010-11.

"We put a lot of time and effort into how we prepare for every series, and that hasn't changed with this one," said the talismanic all-rounder, who has not played any cricket since July after a shoulder injury.

PACE DUO BRING X-FACTOR

Stokes said he was fit and raring to go with both bat and ball and was particularly looking forward to watching England pacemen Mark Wood and Jofra Archer at work.

"It's great to have the X factor that Jofra and Woody possess in terms of pace," he added. "Woody's obviously got over his knee surgery that he had quite a while ago. He's overcome that and he's looking really, really good. Jofra has been out the park for two and a half years now, so it's great seeing those two flying in and sending some fastballs down there."

While much of the focus has been on that duo, Stokes said there was plenty of other fast-bowling talent in the squad.

England, who last lifted the Ashes urn at home in 2015, have a terrible recent record in Australia, losing 13 of the last 15 Tests. The other two were drawn.

Stokes insisted past results meant little,

"They're a phenomenal team, especially in their home, so we know the next two-and-a-half months is going to be tough for us," he said of Australia. "But I think all the series that have gone past, whether that be in Australia or England, I don't think count for much."—Agencies

Los Angeles 2028 Olympic Games schedule revealed

LOS ANGELES: The 2028 Los Angeles Olympics competition schedule was unveiled on Wednesday by organisers, including a showcase spot for the women's 100 metres and a Super Saturday session.

LA28 revealed a detailed schedule earlier than usual. It starts with the opening ceremony on July 14 and ends with the closing ceremony on July 30.

The biggest-ever Games will feature 11,200 athletes in 51 sports across 49 venues.

Every team sport will feature an equal or greater number of women's teams compared to men's teams for the first time with 50.5 percent of total athletes being women.

On day one, July 15, the most women's finals ever held on one day will be contested, starting with women's triathlon with a spotlight on the women's 100 meters.

"We want to come out in these Games with a bang. We want to start day one with a showcase of the fastest females in the world," LA28 chief of sport Shana Ferguson said.

Doing so will mean women must run three 100m heats in one day.

"We did speak at length with athletes. It was a largely positive conversation," Janet Evans, LA28 chief athlete officer, said.

"We're kicking off the athletic competition with one of the marquee events for women athletes.

"When we presented it to the athletes that way, there was excitement. They said let me know early and I'll train to run three 100s in one day."

Organisers flipped swimming and athletics from the traditional schedule so the opening ceremony venue, SoFi Stadium, could also host swimming in the second week.

Track and field events will be held in the first week of the Games, with swimming in the second week.

"You move to the second week. You have 38,000 people in the stands," Evans said. "Having 38,000 fans watch my favorite sport is exciting as well."

Swimmers also have a better chance to attend the opening ceremony without next-morning races to consider.

A 'Super Saturday' schedule on July 29 includes 26 finals sessions in 23 sports, including 15 gold and bronze medal team matches and finals in 15 individual sports.

Among Olympic champions to be crowned on that day are those in athletics, basketball, beach volleyball, boxing, cricket, golf, football, swimming and tennis.

The last Olympic champions will be crowned in swimming just before the closing ceremony.

Organisers scheduled the marathons on the final weekend, the women's race on July 29 and the men's marathon on July 30.

About 14 million tickets will be available for Olympic events, with pricing details to be announced later, but dynamic pricing is not being considered, Ferguson said.

Olympic and sport federation officials have helped create the LA28 schedule.

"We don't do any of this schedule without them," Ferguson said.

Weather considerations went into the plan, with some sessions moved into the evening to have cooler conditions, including for horses at Santa Anita for equestrian events.

Baseball and softball will return to the Olympic lineup. Baseball will be played at Dodger Stadium, home of the reigning Major League Baseball champion Los Angeles Dodgers, with medal games on July 19.

Baseball will begin on July 13, a day ahead of the opening ceremony, with a new competition window to allow MLB players to compete in the Olympics.

Cricket rejoins the Olympic lineup after more than a century with the women's final on July 20 and the men's final on July 29.

Lacrosse, on the 1908 London Olympic calendar and later a demonstration sport, will return with the men's and women's finals on July 29.

Los Angeles will also introduce American flag football and squash on July 15 for Olympic debuts.

Details for the Olympic football tournament, to be staged across the US, and the Los Angeles Paralympics will be announced later.

Ticket registration for the LA Olympics will begin in January. —AFP

India bank on formidable home Test record in SA series

KOLKATA: Shubman Gill's India will look to extend their Test domination at home when a two-match series begins against world champions South Africa on Friday in Kolkata.

India's recent 2-0 sweep of West Indies took them past South Africa to be the third-most successful team at home in Test cricket.

They have 122 wins in the five-day format in India, behind only Australia, who have 262 home wins and England who have 241.

India's excellent home run suffered a setback last year when New Zealand achieved a rare 3-0 Test sweep on Indian soil.

The hosts bounced back in style against the West Indies last month with a 2-0 victory in Gill's first home assignment as Test captain.

That followed a 2-2 draw in the five-Test series in England, Gill's first in charge.

South Africa beat Australia to win the World Test Championship (WTC) final at Lord's in June and recently drew 1-1 in Pakistan.

They will be no pushovers under captain Temba Bavuma despite many of their players making their debuts in India.

South African head coach Shukri Conrad said having quality spinners, including Keshav Maharaj, Senuran Muthusamy and Simon Harmer, gave the team a boost.

"Yes, I think it gives us a lot of confidence," Conrad told reporters at the Eden Gardens on Wednesday.

"Not saying that we didn't have good spinners in the past, but we certainly think we've got a better pack of spinners now in Keshav, Simon and Sen.

"We are quietly confident that we can make history of our own here at Eden Gardens and in India," he said.

Gill, 26, has led from the front after the retirements of Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma and Ravichandran Ashwin.

He scored 754 runs against England and an unbeaten 129 to set up victory in the second Test against the West Indies.

Gill has hinted he would like pitches prepared that provide a balance between bat and ball, rather than the sharply spinning surfaces that have been prevalent in the past.

The pitch at Kolkata's famous stadium is expected to aid reverse swing but become slower as the match progresses.

India have been boosted by the return of livewire wicket-keeper/batsman Rishabh Pant, who recently led India 'A' against South Africa 'A' in two four-day matches.

Pant, a flamboyant left-handed batsman and chattering presence behind the stumps, missed the West Indies series while he recovered from a foot fracture.

India's back-up wicket-keeper Dhruv Jurel hit twin centuries in the second match against South Africa 'A' and is almost certain to play as a batter.

"I don't think you can leave him [Jurel] out for this Test is the short answer," India's assistant coach Ryan ten Doeschate said.

"But obviously, you can only pick 11 as well. So someone else will have to miss out. I think we've got a pretty good idea of the combination."

The visitors will feature several players, including Bavuma, who warmed up for the series by playing for South Africa 'A' last week when they beat India 'A' by five wickets.

Bavuma, who has captained South Africa in 10 Tests — winning nine and drawing one — missed the tour of Pakistan, where Aiden Markram stood in as captain.

Eight of South Africa's squad have never played a Test in India.

Bavuma, opening batsman Markram and pace spearhead Kagiso Rabada have the most experience of Indian conditions.

Batsman Zubayr Hamza and left-arm spinner Muthusamy were on the 2019 tour and Harmer played in 2015.

South Africa have a poor recent record in India, having lost their previous two series 3-0. Their last series win came under Hansie Cronje in 2000.

The second Test is in Guwahati from Nov 22 and will be followed by three ODIs and five Twenty20 matches.—AFP